

Navy Medicine Treats the Czar's Navy

U.S. Navy Bureau of Medicine and Surgery

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If the Japanese surprise attack on Port Arthur, Liaodong Peninsula, in 1904 marked the beginning of the end of the Imperial Russian Navy, the Battle of Tsushima was undeniably its curtain call. Russian losses in the battle fought on May 27-28, 1905 amounted to 11 battleships, six destroyers, four cruisers sunk and some 4,380 sailors killed.

Arguably, the Russian losses would have been greater if weather conditions had not offered the battle torn cruisers Aurora, Jemchug, and Oleg a convenient retreat from the misty fray. Eight days later, the ships hobbled into the Cavite Naval Shipyard in the Philippines seeking medical assistance for its beleaguered crews. Their call was answered by medical personnel of the U.S. Navy.



Navy Medicine had established its first shore facilities on the Philippines beginning in 1899. Six years later it opened U.S. Naval Hospital Cañacao to serve the U.S. Asiatic Fleet. Among the hospital's first patients were wounded sailors from the Battle of Tsushima.

Hospital personnel were stunned to see the deplorable conditions of the crews from these phantom ships. In a letter to the Navy Surgeon General Presley Rixey, Surgeon Clement Biddle, USN, wrote that the Russian sailors arrived with "their wounds untouched from the day the first dressings were applied. All were suppurating and those I saw freely so." He added that their condition reminded him of an age before the "advent of Listerism."

A total of 66 Russian sailors from the three ships were killed in battle and 131 were wounded. Of these, 58 officers and sailors were admitted to the U.S. Naval Hospital Cañacao on June 5th with "extensive lacerations, fractures, splintering of bones, and wounds caused by shell explosions and wooden splinters." Every one of these patients suffered from sepsis. And with the exception of an application of a "rough dressing," they had gone eight days without any medical attention until being admitted to the hospital.

The language barrier between the Russians and Americans proved to be an additional problem. Biddle remarked that neither the Americans nor the Russians spoke each other's language, the medium "of communication being French, and not good French at that."

Medical Inspector Charles Hibbett, commanding officer of Naval Hospital Cañacao, and Assistant Surgeon William Rennie oversaw the sailors' medical care. Nineteen were discharged to duty within days of admission and 34 were transferred to the Russian hospital ship Kastroma on July 10, 1905 for transportation home. Owing to the lack of early surgical attention and advanced infection, three sailors died at Cañacao and were interred at a cemetery adjacent to the hospital that also contained remains of Spanish soldiers and sailors.

Among the Russian officers admitted for treatment included two members of the Czar's family—Prince Poutatin and Count Ivakovleff, both of the Aurora. Poutatin was admitted with an infected sinus in the right auxiliary region and discharged on June 28th. Ivakovleff was treated for minor wound to his ear but remained at the Naval Hospital until August 10th.

Postscript.

In his medical report of the “Russian Wounded Admitted to Cañacao Hospital, June 1905,” Dr. Hibbett noted that the conditions of the wounded were similar to those found in any naval engagement, but this did not excuse the lack of medical attention. He asserted better medical care should have been available on board “modern war ships.”

To Hibbett, the experience added to the argument that frontline medical care should have been available within the eight days it took to transport the wounded to Cañacao. This wartime observation may very well have factored in Navy Medicine’s decision to refit and activate the hospital ship USS Relief for the fleet and assign the first corpsmen to independent duty later in the decade.

After 1923, Naval Hospital Cañacao Hospital was the Navy’s largest medical facility in Asia and remain so until the Japanese invasion of the Philippines. The hospital was not reestablished after the war.

The Russo-Japanese War was the low point in the history of the Imperial Russian Navy. To make up for their tremendous losses suffered, the Russian Navy transferred many of its most experienced officers and enlisted personnel from the Black Sea to the war front. This act--coupled with the demoralizing defeats of the Czar’s Navy--helped create the ideal conditions for mutiny on the battleship Potemkin in the Black Sea in June 1905 and helped propagate the seeds of revolution.

Sources.

“3 Russian Vessels Safe in Manila Bay: Enquist Escapes with the Oleg, Aurora, and Jemchug.” New York Times, June 4, 1905.

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